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GEORGE COMBE ON PEACE.

LETTER TO THE EDINBURGH PEACE CONFERENCE.

[I was prevented by infirm health from attending² the recent meetings of the Peace Congress in this city; but I am anxious to testify publicly my adherence to its principles. Being accustomed to think, that the Divine Ruler of the world has so arranged its constitution that the welfare of every human being is compatible with that of every other, and that the same truth holds good in regard to the well-being of nations, I cannot consider it necessary, according to the order of nature, for one nation to injure any other nation, in order to promote its own prosperity; but the reverse. It may, and certainly will, advance its own happiness by doing good to others, but never by injuring them. I discard, therefore, all natural necessity for war, as the means of attaining prosperity, equally in the case of nations and individuals,

Whence, then, do wars arise? First, from ignorance and unbelief that the world is actually constituted in the way here asserted. Secondly, from a portion of mankind being actuated by passions for domination, aggrandisement, and their neighbor's wealth, and by a love of enterprises that promise to gratify these unjust, aggressive, and rapacious propensities. They constitute, however, only a minority in civilized Europe; but they still are a powerful and formidable band. When collisions of supposed interests or ambition occur between the rulers of nations, this class, on both sides, instantly grasps the sword, and incites its fellow-citizens to war. The civilization of Europe is still so imperfectly developed, that, even in the most enlightened nations, there is a large substratum of barbaric feeling, which, in ordinary circumstances, is quiescent, but which is ever ready to kindle into a blaze, and rush to action, when excited by external appeals. The combative, domineering, and aggressive minority address themselves to this slumbering fire in their fellow-citizens, and too often succeed in blowing it into a flame; and then threats and insults are hurled against nations, in which the same process is enacting. The passions of both are aroused; and their real interests, as well as the dictates of reason, religion, and morality, are trampled under foot. A wild note of defiance swells from every throat; in the blaze of excitement, war is declared; and the people proudly resolve to die at the supposed call of honor, in defence of their laws, their country, and their king.

But, if the excited people are called to the bar of reason, and asked what is the cause of the quarrel, and what object of substantial interest they are pursuing in rushing into war; and especially if this question is put to both belligerents, and each of them is called to define the grounds of their complaints, it follows inevitably, from my first proposition regarding the constitution of the world, that one or other, or probably both, will be found to be pursuing a phantom; and a body of clear-headed men, who understand the real order of Providence, could demonstrate this truth to their understandings, the moment they could be induced to allay their passions, and listen to reason.

Now, Admiral Napier, and many other excellent persons, who are sincere lovers of peace, looking only at the aggressive and rapacious minority of nations, and at their influence on the majority, propose to protect ourselves against this excited feeling in the French, or any other foreign nation, by building huge ships of war, and raising large armies of soldiers. Let us look for one moment at the natural relation of this mode of proceeding to the state of the French mind, which is supposed to be impelling them to invade us.

As already mentioned, the rational and moral majority of that people must be duped, misled, and roused through passion into a state of blind oblivion of their own welfare and of ours, and hurried away by the basest and meanest motives—the desire of revenge and plunder,—before they could contemplate attacking us. Now, the equipment of armies and ships of war are simply notes of defiance; their import is, ‘Come on, if you dare!’ The natural effect of defiance on an excited, passionate, and irrational individual or nation, is to excite their evil propensities still more: they hurl back the defiance. Their pride and vanity become enlisted with their other passions. Our attitude and language provoke them; they also point to their ships of war and their armies, and defy us; and in this state of things it becomes impossible to preserve peace.

But 'a soft answer turneth away wrath.' The value of the Peace Congress, in my eyes, is that it speaks to both nations in the calm voice of reason, morality, religion, and interest. It calls both to the bar of common sense, and urges them to consider what their quarrel is about, and how they are to gain their object by fighting. The natural effect of such an appeal, coming from large assemblages of Englishmen, Scotchmen, and Irishmen, addressed to the French nation, would be to calm, and not to excite, their passions; to soothe their pride; to enlist their vanity on the side of virtue; to awaken their reason; and to lead them to regard their true interests. We may assure them of our esteem and kind feeling towards them, and ask them to weigh in the scale of reason the loss to themselves by the ruin of their trade with us, and the sufferings of their vine-growers, silk-manufacturers, agriculturists, and many other classes of their people, against the possible gain to them by the plunder of the English coast, even supposing them capable of effecting it.

If the French had a free government, and large assemblies of their citizens were to meet and address us in a similar tone of feeling, and with corresponding appeals to our reason and our interests, would the effect on us be less favorable towards disposing us to peace, than if they hurled defiance at us, and pointed to their steam navy and enormous equipment of soldiers? Every person who understands the constitution of human nature, will answer this question in one and the same way. The Peace Congress is attempting to act on the principle now suggested; and it is for this reason that I adhere to it.

I am not an advocate of non-resistance, because I acknowledge the existence of men naturally rapacious, ambitious, and aggressive, and also their malign influence, when not counteracted, on the better portions of society. I desire to be prepared to meet such men in their own way, should all other means of restraining them fail; but my conviction is, that they are the minority in civilized nations, and that appeals to reason, moral and religious principles, and the interests of the majority, would suffice to curb them, provided we ourselves were truly actuated by these motives, and had faith in their efficacy while we presented them to others. The Peace Congress appears to me to be a powerful instrument for instilling these principles into the minds of our people, and also for presenting them with efficacy and earnestness to both nations.

But it is said that our Cabinet Ministers and diplomatists are as desirous to maintain peace as the Peace Congress itself; that they negotiate in this spirit; and that it is unwise and unnecessary to interfere with their efforts by public demonstrations, which may embarrass, but never can aid them. I readily acknowledge that of late years our Cabinet has shown a praiseworthy desire for peace, and I have great confidence in their intentions; but it appears to me that they do not possess the power, without the aid of the people, to meet and remove the real causes of war. I have lived in two foreign countries, America and Germany, at times when there were threatenings of war with England; and I read the daily effusions of the press, and heard the sentiments of the people during the heat of the controversies. I read also the leading English newspapers, and thus saw both sides of the questions at the same time; and I have no hesitation in saying, that the negotiations of the diplomatists, conducted in secret, and on grounds utterly unknown to the public, had no perceptible influence on the minds of the people. The threatenings, boastings, misrepresentations, and abusive language poured out by a portion of the press of each of these countries against the other, provoked and excited the public mind of each in an alarming degree, played into the hands of the belligerent and rapacious members of the respective communities, and furnished them with plausible grounds for drawing good men into participation in the quarrel.

In illustration of this remark, I may perhaps be excused for presenting an extract from my 'Notes on America,' published in 1851. Under the date of 2nd March, 1839, it is said, "On the 9th of February, Mr. Van Buren presented to the House of Representatives at Washington, a report from the Secretary of State, with the relative documents, regarding the dispute with England about the Maine boundary; and on the 1st of March, both Houses of Congress were engaged from noon till midnight in discussing the subject, and finally passed a Bill to authorize the President to engage 50,000 volunteers, and take other measures of a warlike character, to support the Governor of Maine. The ef-

fect of these discussions on the public mind has been very striking. In every circle into which we enter, almost every voice is raised for war. The battles, both by land and sea, in which the Americans have been victorious over the British, are fought over again in the newspapers; and if one were to judge from the tone of the public mind, war would appear to be inevitable. Amidst this excitement, however, a few individuals, of advanced age and experience, may be met with, who in private conversation strongly deprecate hostilities; but they regard the current of popular opinion as too strong at present to be stemmed with success."—Vol. ii. p. 116.

The preparations authorized by Congress included the fortification of their coasts against an expected British invasion! Fortunately the Maine boundary appeared to our countrymen to be a matter of small moment, and England did not become equally excited. Our Government sent Lord Ashburton as plenipotentiary to Washington, and he and the American Cabinet speedily arranged the dispute to the satisfaction of both nations. But as public opinion exercises a controlling influence over the Government in both countries, this state of excitement was highly dangerous to peace, so much so, that Mr. Van Buren, then President, said to me, in private conversation, that he regretted the rapid communication then just established between England and the United States by means of steam-ships, for only one reason, because it constantly furnished fresh fuel to the passions of both nations. The excitement was wholly irrational; and had the aged, experienced, and good men here mentioned, who saw it to be so, been supported by a large and influential body of citizens, like the Peace Congress, they could have done great service to the character as well as to the real interests of their country, by helping to stem the torrent of warlike, boastful, and ambitious feeling. The American Cabinet also, in their efforts to preserve peace, would have been strengthened by the moral power of such a body.

Even in despotic countries, the Government is more or less influenced by public opinion; and an instrument calculated to lead that opinion towards peace, could not fail to serve the cause of human happiness and progress, by helping to restrain passion in periods of excitement. It is no answer to say, that in France and Russia, Peace Congresses would not be permitted to exist. So much the worse for these countries; but this does not prove that such associations are in themselves irrational and unnecessary. It shows, indeed, that they are too moral to be tolerated by rulers who acknowledge no right in heaven or earth to control their self-will; but it does not demonstrate that despots are exempt from the laws which regulate the welfare of nations, or that these laws, if calmly, clearly, and affectionately expounded to their subjects, would not meet with due response from their moral, religious, and intellectual faculties. In my opinion, an institution or association to accomplish this object is much needed in every country, and is calculated to exercise a highly beneficial influence in advancing the civilization of the world.

I conclude by repeating, that, by the order of nature, war is not necessary for the welfare of nations, and that the causes of it are evil passions; that these can be more successfully allayed by strong, yet respectful and sincere appeals to the true honor, interests, and duty of those who are led away by them, than by threatening, abusing, and defying them; that if conviction of the truth of these propositions were generally entertained and acted on by the people of the various European nations, wars between them would cease; that diplomacy seldom, if ever, aims at producing this conviction in the people; that the Peace Congress does so, and thus supplies an agency which is truly needed to avert or remove the causes of war; and that on this account it deserves encouragement and support. Some of its individual members may entertain extreme opinions on the lawfulness of war, even in self-defence, and others may seek to promote its objects by arguments from which I may dissent; but this does not affect the principle on which it is founded, and on that I take my stand. If all the efforts of both Cabinet Ministers and the Peace Congress fail in inducing our neighbors to act honorably and justly towards us, then I should join the men of the sword in defending the national honor and interests by fleets and armies.